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The influence of social interaction on the dynamics of employees' psychological contracting in digitally transforming organizations

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ABSTRACT

This paper takes a process perspective in exploring the influence of social interaction on the dynamics of psychological contracting throughout organizational change. Although social interaction is a key focus in social exchange theory, this aspect is largely overlooked in the current psychological contract literature. In this qualitative study, we adopt a retrospective design, asking change recipients to recollect events over time in the context of digital transformation in Dutch travel organizations. Our data reveal a sequence of different kinds of social interactions over the course of a change process, from collective-focused interactions (i.e., kindness and sharing) in stable contracts to transactional interactions (i.e., “what is in it for me”) following psychological contract disruption, to relational interactions (i.e., vigilance about equity in social exchange) in psychological contract repair, and to a final return to resonance and alignment with others and a return to psychological contract maintenance. Our results suggest that social interactions play a more potent role in the dynamics of psychological contracting than is currently recognized in the literature. Finally, we discuss a number of implications for dynamic models of psychological contracting.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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Social interaction; dynamics of psychological contracting; digitally transforming organizations

Dynamic, reciprocal relationships are fundamental to organizations and to organizing (Barnard, 1938; Heaphy et al., 2018), and the patterns of social interaction on which relationships are formed (Blau, 1964) are a key mechanism to understand how employees deal with large-scale business transformation on a day-to-day basis. Employee perceptions concerning the terms of the individual-organization exchange relationship are consensually captured by means of the psychological contract (henceforth: PC). A PC is referred to as a system of unwritten understandings and obligations between an employer and his/her employees. It contains understandings of mutual expectations and obligations of how both parties are to act (Rousseau, 1995). Although social relations play a key role in seminal works in this area (Argyris, 1960; Blau, 1964; Rousseau, 1995), most literature provides an “undersocialized picture” (Akkermans, De Jong, De Jong, & Bal, 2019; Solinger, 2019).

In view of the above, this study highlights the socially embedded nature of change in PCs and contributes to the body of knowledge in this field in three ways. First, since PC development is dynamic by nature and is built upon continuous exchange (Griep & Vantilborgh, 2018), our approach adds to the recent growth in PC dynamics literature (Bankins, 2015) through an empirical exploration of the dynamic phase model of PC (Rousseau, Tomprou, & Hansen, 2018). Second, we

contribute to current knowledge by detailing specific social interaction mechanisms that have distinct impacts on the currently known temporal features of psychological contracting (e.g., PC maintenance, renegotiation, and repair). This offers additional insights into the structure of PC dynamics; such theorizing is much needed in a literature characterized by person-centric assumptions (Griep et al., 2019; Solinger, 2019). Third, we consider a business context which reflects a digitally transforming organization as perceived by employees, thus adding to the understanding of how the changing nature of work impacts on PCs (Griep et al., 2019; Tomprou & Hansen, 2018).

Literature

Dynamic psychological contracting

PCs are fundamentally dynamic in nature such that interaction partners – based on their experiences over a course of interactions that unfold over time – change their perceptions regarding inducements that can be expected and which investments should be done in return. Recent theory developed by Rousseau et al. (2018) explained this dynamic nature of the PC. In particular, they proposed a dynamic model that

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Data availability: the data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, A. Van Der Schaft. The data are not publicly available due to their containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants. This data set has not been used for published work prior to the current paper.

details a number of phases in the psychological contracting process, namely creation, maintenance, disruption, renegotiate/repair, and a return back to maintenance or ending in dissolution. *Creation*, also referred to as “socialization”, refers to establishing a person-organization exchange relationship and, concomitantly, a PC based on employees’ pre-employment expectations and organizational information. *Maintenance* refers to a process where a mental schema about a give-and-take balance (or “equilibrium”) is acted out, largely unconsciously and for as long as balance is not perturbed. Throughout episodes of organizational change – a context in which organizations have a difficult time in keeping their commitments such that “promises and deals made in good faith one day may be broken the next” (Guest, 2004, p. 543) – *disruption* of this balance could lead to experiences of PC breach. In such circumstances, “employees are unable to rely on their PC as they did before” (Tomprou, Rousseau, & Hansen, 2015, p. 561) and “individuals are typically motivated to reduce the negative affect caused by the experienced discrepancies between expectations and actual experiences” (p. 564). In a process to *renegotiate and repair* the contract, employees might either renegotiate the contract towards a more favourable fulfilment ratio (known as PC thriving), repair the contract to a previous level of fulfilment (reactivation), or have it deteriorate to a lower level of fulfilment than before (impairment) before *returning back to maintenance* or working towards a complete *dissolution* of the contract (e.g., leaving the organization) (Solinger, Hofmans, Bal, & Jansen, 2016; Tomprou et al., 2015). According to Rousseau et al. (2018), personal goal attainment and velocity feedback (i.e., the speed with which the individual receives the desired information on the degree to which his/her goals in the PC will be attained) form important drivers for the dynamic PC process to evolve from one stage to the next.

Organizational change and the PC

Rapid and transformational technological and societal disruptions drive changes in ways of working that challenge existing mental schemas and drive individuals to re-evaluate their implicit employment relationship (De Ruiter, Schalk, Schaveling, & Van Gelder, 2017; Schalk & Roe, 2007). Therefore, as a consequence of these “transformational” change events (Rousseau, 1995), management and employees experience a radical shift in the nature of their relationships (Van der Smissen, Schalk, & Freese, 2013).

“Change”, however, is a broad notion, and different events and process characteristics (e.g., “novelty”: Chaudhry, Coyle-Shapiro, & Wayne, 2011; Morgeson, Mitchell, & Liu, 2015) trigger different employee responses (Van der Smissen et al., 2013). Although change is often initiated based on developments at the strategic level (e.g., anticipating on industry-level changes, such as the so-called “bricks-to-clicks” revolution in the travel industry), we argue that employee change experiences might be more concerned with their local repercussions on an operational level, such as the entrance of a new manager, the loss of a colleague, the announcement of frozen budgets for development, and so on. Morgeson et al. (2015) explain that “the greater the distance between two organizational levels, the less likely entities affiliated with one level will

access information and be influenced by events arising at the other” (p. 526). To explain the relation between organizational change and PC change, our study initially focused on the trickling down of strategic, tactical to operational change events that employees are confronted with and that trigger them to consciously evaluate the PC and possibly activate coping responses (Wiechers, Lub, Coyle-Shapiro, & Ten Have, 2017). A better understanding of this response is needed to prevent low trust and cynicism and to strengthen employees’ contributions to positive change outcomes (Pate, Martin, & Staines, 2000; Tomprou & Hansen, 2018).

Individual, team, and collective psychological contracting

Rousseau et al. (2018) and Tomprou et al. (2015) based their theorizing on a self-regulation framework (Carver & Scheier, 1981). This framework builds on the notion that the individual him/herself is the major anchor point in achieving reciprocal balance with the organization. Yet, rather than viewing employees as relatively sovereign individuals, referring to anchor points that are engaged in navigation efforts, one could also expand the range of possible anchor points to forces outside of the individual. The recent focus on social context within PC literature suggests that an exploration of higher levels of analysis (e.g., teams or the collective) brings a new understanding of PC processes (e.g., Akkermans et al., 2019; De Vos & Tekleab, 2014; Gibbard et al., 2017; Ho, 2005; Ho & Levesque, 2005; Laulié & Tekleab, 2016; Tekleab, Laulié, De Vos, De Jong, & Coyle-Shapiro, 2019; Tomprou & Hansen, 2018). Laulié and Tekleab (2016, p. 660) state: “through social learning and social information processing, groups of employees may create (in time) homogeneous perceptions about the way employers fulfil their promises”. Their multi-level theory of PC fulfilment in teams differentiates between the fulfilment of individual expectations shared amongst colleagues and the fulfilment of team expectations (promises made to the team). Furthermore, Akkermans et al. (2019) contemplate the influence of social interaction on PC development, leading to three levels of PC existence: the individual level, as we know it from a majority of PC literature, the level of direct consensus between colleagues, being an aggregate of individual perceptions, and a collective level as a shared mental model.

An equilibrium, as experienced in stable PCs, can thus be shared in social space; this is something Rousseau (1995) named the “normative contract”. The recent focus of PC scholars on higher-level constructs suggests that the processes involved in maintaining an “equilibrium”, discussed in process theories of the PC (Rousseau et al., 2018; Tomprou et al., 2015), will involve mechanisms that are possibly social in nature (e.g., changes in activities and group membership or changes in hierarchical structures) (Tomprou & Hansen, 2018). To capture the mechanisms in social exchange that lead to individual, team, and collective dynamic psychological contracting in more detail, we elaborate on Solinger’s normative-contextual framework for psychological contracting (2019).

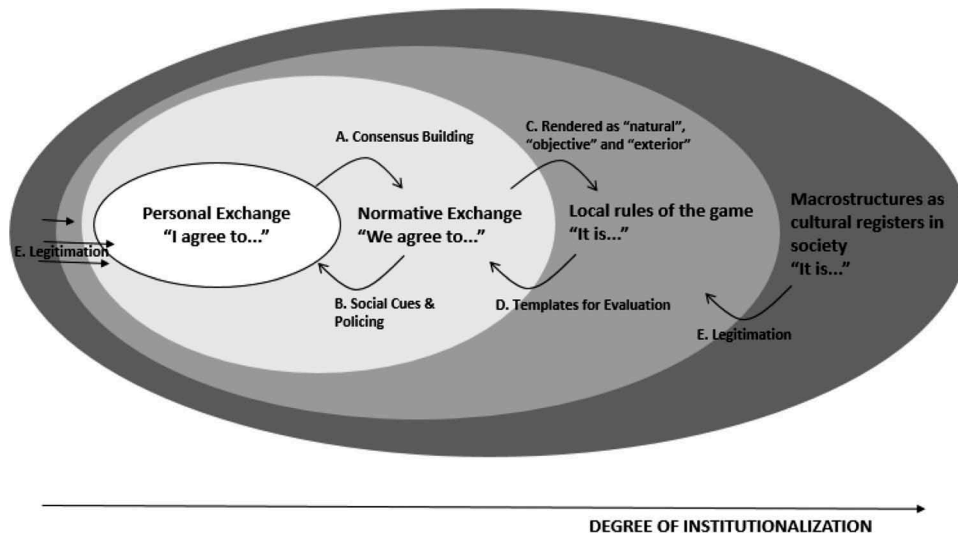


Figure 1. Degrees of institutionalization in the PC process, reprinted from Solinger (2019).

Solinger's "normative-contextual" framework for psychological contracting

The normative-contextual framework for psychological contracting that is proposed by Solinger (2019) aims to build bridges between PC and institutional theory. It considers institutions as typified social interaction patterns and self-policed conventions, and thus, in their very essence, they are considered to be made from social interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006). Solinger's framework introduces a multi-layered system of factors affecting the PC (see also Heaphy et al., 2018; Ho & Levesque, 2005), varying in different degrees of institutionalization. In particular, the framework lists normative-contextual influences on psychological contracting in a manner that is similar but not identical to what is proposed by Akkermans et al. (2019), ranging from low institutionalization (i.e., PC as an idiosyncratic, individual agreement) to high institutionalization (with taken-for-granted and self-policed conventions of contracting which operate as institutions at a societal and organizational level), with peer-to-peer interactions in a crucial intermediate position. This perspective broadens the scope of PC literature by enriching the dominant individual-to-organization bond with the notions of typical modes of exchange at the group, organizational, and societal levels of analysis.

While in the eyes of organizational behaviour scholars "institutions" are intuitively seen as distal macro-level bodies that are far removed from the individual mechanisms of interest, institutions are in fact extremely pervasive, even at the individual level of analysis. That is to say, institutions operate as dominant realities and taken-for-granted templates for evaluating a PC. As such, institutions give different precedence to what criteria of evaluation "deserve attention (selective orientation), and the meaning we attach to these perceptions (encoding) are formed by gradual internalization of prevailing cultural patterns" (Thomas, Ravlin, Liao, Morrell, & Au, 2016, p. 259). When it comes to employees' experiences of the PC, the degrees of institutionalization refer to socially sanctioned ratios of investments and rewards vis-à-vis the organization that are perceived as "natural" (i.e., taken-for-granted as "the way we do things around here"), as objective (i.e., as a

matter of fact, rather than a subjective or idiosyncratic assessment), and as exterior (i.e., as if the socially sanctioned contract exists independent of the ones who produce them). With social sanctioning, we mean that a PC is experienced and policed upon as "the rules of game" where the criterion for what makes a "good" contract is not personally but socially determined (e.g., via collective beliefs: Akkermans et al., 2019). Thus, while at low levels of institutionalization psychological contracting results from personal exchange ("I agree to ..."), through normative exchange over peer-to-peer interactions ("We agree to ..."), it will gradually evolve into a dominant social reality, that is, an institution ("It is ...": Ashforth & Rogers, 2012; Solinger, 2019). An illustration of the accompanying processes is presented in Figure 1.

Despite this theorizing on the socially-oriented nature of the dynamic PC, corresponding empirical work is limited. As Griep et al. (2019) propose, future research on PC processes should consider how social context determines workplace interactions and in what way these interactions evolve. To do so, an interactional approach in studying the PC is needed (Coyle-Shapiro & Neuman, 2004).

An interactional approach to psychological contracting – Fiske's (1992) unified theory of social relations

Interactions are defining mechanisms of social exchange (Blau, 1964) and form cornerstones of the employment relationship (Coyle-Shapiro & Conway, 2005). Moreover, interactions are critical for the emergence of shared constructs (Laulié & Tekleab, 2016). Therefore, we build upon fundamental forms of social interaction (Fiske, 1992) to see whether and how the way people interact could relate to the patterns of individual, team, and collective psychological contracting discussed above. Relational models, as described by Fiske in his Unified Theory of Social Relations (Fiske, 1992), form a fundamental basis for understanding how humans interact and for understanding the underlying mental schemas that reflect implicit rules of social exchange. Fiske (1992) describes four elementary forms of sociality by which (groups of) people shape

interaction in social life. He states: “The relational models theory explains social life as a process of seeking, making, sustaining, repairing, adjusting, judging, construing, and sanctioning relationships. It postulates that people are oriented to relationships as such, that people generally want to relate to each other, feel committed to the basic types of relationships, regard themselves as obliged to abide by them, and impose them to other people.” (Fiske, 1992, p. 689). This theory explains individuals’ interpretation of interactions (Bartlett, 1995; Fiske & Taylor, 1991), and these interpretations influence the PC – more than the actual message sent (Rousseau, 1995). Analogously, Fiske’s (1992) Unified Theory of Social Relations includes four forms for interaction and underlying motives for evaluating exchange; these include Market Pricing, Equality Matching, Authority Ranking, and Communal Sharing.

Market Pricing interaction is considered to be the most rational form of exchange since, in this form, interaction is based on exchanging money and/or commodities with proportional value motivated by (economic) self-interest. Under this calculating form of interaction, mutual moral commitment differs strongly from that of other models as all conditions and outcomes are explicated clearly, focused on the individual, and can be evaluated easily.

Equality Matching is characterized by egalitarian reciprocity. Through the principles of equality, this form is based on “I do something for you, you do something for me”. Fairness in interaction and gains is considered to lead evaluation. In particular, reciprocal matters are defined by equality in status, and perceived fairness is the leading mechanism. In a work context, this aspect is often manifest in simple matters, such as carpooling, but also in more serious situations, such as providing feedback. Both parties know “who owes who” without explicit bargaining (expressions of equity sensitivity; Restubog, Bordia, & Tang, 2007).

In *Authority Ranking*, “relationships are based on a model of asymmetry among people” (Fiske, 1992, p. 691). Status and linear rankings form fundamentals for interaction, and the identity of individuals is based on “knowing one’s place in the hierarchy” (Fiske, 1992, p. 701). People seem to identify either as a leader or as a follower in a specific context. This implies a strong relational orientation, including role appropriate behaviour (Flynn, 2005), underlined by the French expression “noblesse oblige” as used by Fiske (p. 700).

Finally, in *Communal Sharing* interactions, entities belonging to a group are considered equivalent and undifferentiated, and as such the collective consciousness trumps perceived individual identity, a phenomenon which equates to “generalized reciprocity” (Fiske, 1992, p. 693). Group interests prevail with everyone being expected to contribute according to their ability. The absence of a “scorecard” requires high levels of trust as well as mutual unwritten expectations and obligations. Fiske notes that “communal sharing engenders a loss of separate personal identity” (Fiske, 1992, p. 699).

Concluding, Fiske (1992) noted that the four forms go hand in hand with “schemata that people use to construct and construe relationships” (p. 689). The four forms deal with what is perceived to be fair exchange. Related concepts include “reciprocal exchange ideology” (Coyle-Shapiro & Neuman, 2004) and “interactional justice” (Bies & Moag, 1986).

Table 1. Relatedness in two complementary theoretical frames shaping social interaction.

SCHOLAR ORIENTATION	Fiske (1992)	Solinger (2019)
<i>Personal, “I-focused”</i>	Market Pricing	Personal Exchange
<i>Relational, “we-focused”</i>	Equality Matching	Normative Exchange
	Authority Ranking	
<i>Collective, “it-focused”</i>	Communal Sharing	Local rules of the game
		Macro structures

Solinger’s (2019) and Fiske’s (1992) perspectives as complementary frameworks

While there are important distinctions, the normative-contextual perspective (Solinger, 2019) and the social relations perspective (Fiske, 1992) are complementary as they address similar features of social interaction. These features include personal, relational, and collective orientations as alternative underpinning orientations in contracting (see Table 1). With regard to the individual level, Solinger’s (2019) ‘personal exchange’ – including personal preferences, interests, and biases as a basis for contracting – parallels with Fiske’s (1992) “market pricing exchange” in the sense that giving and receiving benefits is explicit in both notions and exchange occurs within a single person-organization dyad, with personal gain as an important driver. The frameworks are complementary in that, in Solinger’s (2019) terms, market pricing can be seen as a particular macrostructure (namely, market logic) that is imported as a cultural register in order to strengthen and legitimate idiosyncratic, personal exchanges with the organization. A combination of personal exchange and market pricing is, for instance, at work when individuals bargain idiosyncratic deals (Rousseau, 2015); an individual is only in the position to strike such a deal when (s)he believes to have considerable bargaining power associated with an employment market (e.g., unique skills that are highly sought after and/or the threat associated with the individual leaving the firm). The considered time frame for personal exchange with the organization seems to be based on short-term or even immediate reciprocation.

Second, on the relational level (see also Flynn, 2005), both frameworks distinguish immediate peer-to-peer interactions happening at the local level (team/subunit), while assuming that these interactions are decisive for forming a PC. Akin to the notion of social cues in normative exchange in Solinger’s (2019) framework, the orientation in Fiske’s (1992) forms of Authority Ranking and Equality Matching is fundamentally local and other-focused. That is, individuals define themselves on the basis of a *local* pattern of social exchange, where one’s type of reciprocation is decisive for one’s status and position within a social group. Typically, social conflict is minimized when asymmetries and equity imbalances are kept to a minimum; this introduces the value of alignment and consensus building around a particular PC as an important complementary we-focused mechanism, which is central to the related chapter in Solinger’s work (2019). Thus, the two frameworks are complementary, emphasizing either differentiation (Authority Ranking, Equality Matching; Fiske, 1992) or integration of identities and statuses within groups and in peer-to-peer interactions (alignment and peer policing; Solinger, 2019).

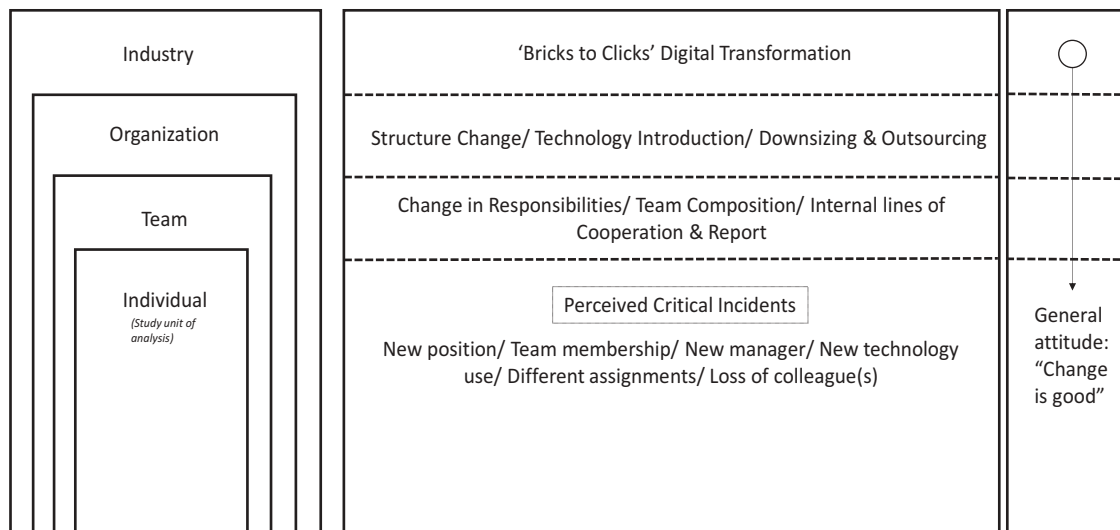


Figure 2. Trickle-down effects of digital transformation through different levels of analysis.

Finally, on the collective level, Fiske's (1992) communal sharing interactions seem complementary to Solinger's (2019) organization-wide rules of the game ("It is ..."). In particular, both scholars describe a shift in the locus of accountability from interior to exterior, with exchange being focused on long-term relationships and continuous interactions, and with individual contributions dispersing or transforming into a shared notion of collective gain. There is a collective orientation on group norm fulfilment, and in this sense both Solinger and Fiske describe interactions driven by collectivistic value orientations.

This theoretical outline deals with an explanation of the dynamic phase model of psychological contracting and its relation to organizational change, and it discusses additional socially-oriented influences on dynamic PC sensemaking. More specifically, we look at two theoretical models that explain the personal, relational, and collective interactions that define the individual's social exchange. Based on this outline, the following research questions are formulated:

- (1) *How does the dynamic phase model of psychological contracting reflect in employees' perceptions of organizational change?*
- (2) *How do specific social interaction mechanisms affect the currently known phases of psychological contracting?*
- (3) *How do these social interaction mechanisms evolve over time throughout dynamic PC processes in organizational change?*

Method

Research context

This empirical study is focused on the Dutch travel industry, a context that reflects the high pace and change-intensive nature of contemporary organizations. Facilitated by technological advancements, the sector has evolved into a growing e-commerce industry, selling commodity-like, intangible, and generally well-understood products (Serenko & Stach, 2009). Rapid and disruptive innovations have strongly impacted

organizational processes in travel agencies and the work of their employees. From the management interviews conducted in preparation for this study, we learned that at the strategic level, all organizations face digital industry transformation. However, the way in which this digitalization movement is translated on the tactical level can be quite different. Some agencies have started to introduce new technologies, others have changed their structures, downsized/outsourced personnel, and initiated culture change programmes. At the operational level, there has been yet another set of critical events that resulted from these strategic and tactical changes (see Figure 2); what we studied is the impact of this trickling-down of change events on employees' changing PC perceptions. Management in the Dutch travel industry perceives the sector to be able to offer only limited financial incentives for employees. Instead, motivation is expected to spring from employees' "love for travel" ideals and, again in the words of management, the strongly valued collective atmosphere in which colleagues often become friends.

Procedure

We adopted a qualitative research approach by using in-depth interviews to "form an understanding of the world from the perspective of those studied ... and for examining and articulating processes" (Pratt, 2009, p. 856). To theorize the process of PC evaluation and to explore social interaction influences on three distinct levels (i.e., personal, relational, and collective), one important selection criterion was that the participating organizations were of a size in which these distinguished levels of interest could be clearly identified. In addition, the participating organizations had to have comparable structures in the sense that people have an opportunity to relate to the self, to a team with co-workers, and to the organization as a whole. Furthermore, the selected organizations had to have existed for a period of at least ten years, since start-up and scale-up companies were expected to have very different challenges in terms of patterns of, and responses to, organizational change and the institutionalization of PC elements.

Initially, eleven interviews with a management representative were conducted to identify organizational change and to understand management's change intentions. Subsequently, the responsible HR officers in the participating organizations provided us with a pool of potential interviewees. Ultimately, 26 interviews were conducted, and after twenty interviews saturation was reached. As depicted in Table 2, the sample was heterogeneous in terms of age ($M_{\text{age}} = 34$, $SD = 9$, range: 23–59 years), tenure ($M_{\text{tenure}} = 8$, $SD = 6$, range: 1–25 years), and level of education, which ranged from vocational to university degrees. Participants held diverse positions, varying from more traditional positions in sales or customer services (front-office) to more emerging positions in experience management and scrum mastery (back-office).

Interviews

In line with Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2012), data were collected through intensive in-depth interviews whilst flexibly using an interview protocol, combining a focus on the topic of study and an open-ended enquiry to understand how individuals experienced the process and identified important moments in the process. Questions were asked in order to capture the trickle-down structure of change as depicted in Figure 2. These questions included notions of individual perceptions ("what do you think ...") and perceptions driven by shared consensus ("what do you [as a team] think ...") as well as overall team and/or organizational perceptions ("how does this organization ...") (Akkermans et al., 2019). Critical Incident Technique (CIT) was used to capture personal recollection and responses to events in change processes and to establish an appropriate level of depth needed to capture employees' evaluation and re-evaluation processes. CIT was selected for this empirical work as it is considered the best suited technique for qualitatively investigating processes as experienced by respondents (Chell, 1998; Langley, 1999). Each interview lasted for

approximately one hour and took place in a meeting room at the employee's site. All interviewees were assured confidentiality. Interviews were conducted in Dutch by a native speaker of Dutch. The quotations selected for analysis were later translated into English and checked by another researcher on accuracy of the translations (Hambleton, 1993). The interviewer followed an emergence interviewing approach in which early analyses of responses led to alterations in questions in the succeeding interviews (Murphy, Klotz, & Kreiner, 2017). The term "emergence" points to the fact that in this approach researchers stay open to new developments during data collection and analysis, and follow these towards "most theoretically-promising leads", (p. 294). After the interviews, respondents received the full transcript in order to correct omissions and/or to provide additional information. Only minor textual remarks were received upon this request.

Data analysis

Inspired by the work of Parzefall and Coyle-Shapiro (2011) on sensemaking of PC breach, data analysis followed a *Template Analysis* approach. This approach combines grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) and content analysis (King, 1998; Schreier, 2012). The grounded theory process yielded fragments that included initial information concerning the perceived interactions throughout critical events. On the basis of template analysis, we drafted codes building on our theoretical framework, and this provided information on the preferred modes of interaction [Fiske (1992): Market Pricing, Equality Matching, Authority Ranking, Communal Sharing] and institutionalization (individual, relational, collective orientation) specifically throughout the phases of psychological contracting (maintenance, disruption, renegotiate/repair, restored maintenance/dissolution). For this, we focused on precisely

Table 2. Participants.

#	Age	Tenure within org.	Education	Job Title	Critical Incident
1	23	1	Intermediate vocational	Front-office Travel Advisor	Newly employed in organization
2	25	3,5	Bachelor's degree	Back-office Administrator	The influx of new colleagues
3	26	5	Bachelor's degree	Team Leader travel advisors	Personally responsible for tech. introduction
4	26	2	Master's degree	Jr. Mar- Comm. Specialist	Experiencing different assignments
5	27	5	Intermediate vocational	Scrum Master	Taking up new position/promotion
6	27	1	Bachelor's degree	PR Officer	Entering this organization
7	28	6	Intermediate vocational	Account Management support	Being selected for new experiment: multi-disciplinary team
8	28	1	Bachelor's degree	Travel Advisor	Introduction of new IT in daily work
9	28	2	Bachelor's degree	Travel Advisor	Implementing new technology for colleagues
10	28	1	Bachelor's degree	Team Manager Customer Service	Confrontation with high-impact top-down decision
11	30	7	Master's degree	Travel Specialist	Starting in self-organizing team
12	31	8	Bachelor's degree	Innovation Officer	Supervisor's role became obsolete
13	31	10	Intermediate vocational	Customer Service employee	Experiencing presentation of new organizational strategy
14	32	1	Bachelor's degree	Yield Manager	Adjusting to new organization, trying to adjust to colleagues
15	34	7	Bachelor's degree	Programmer	Starting in agile team
16	34	10	Bachelor's degree	Business Travel Consultant	Experiencing announcement of outsourcing to other unit
17	36	18	Bachelor's degree	Experience Manager	Experiencing the announcement of re-organization
18	37	12	Bachelor's degree	Subject Matter Expert	Experiencing dysfunctional new international cooperation
19	37	14	Bachelor's degree	Purchase Specialist	Starting in new team structure
20	38	4,5	Intermediate vocational	Webmaster	Moving to new building
21	39	10	Bachelor's degree	Product Developer	Two top leaders left the organization
22	41	11	Secondary education	Team Leader	Receiving new strategic directions from upper level management
23	43	7	Master's degree	Controller	Loss of management position
24	50	14	Intermediate vocational	ICT employee	Involuntary placement in team
25	57	25	Bachelor's degree	Manager Tour Operating & Dynamic Packaging	Individual manoeuvres in organizational politics to retain position
26	59	16	Intermediate vocational	Customer Contact Centre	Use of new technology in daily work



Figure 3. a. Coding frame for analysis of phases maintenance and disruption. b. Coding frame for analysis of phases renegotiation/repair and return to maintenance. For the sake of illustrating the sequence, the figure depicts fluid lines whereas our analysis only included a categorization of "maintenance", "moment of disruption" (critical event), "repair or renegotiate" and "restoring maintenance". CS = Communal sharing; AR = Authority ranking; EM = Equality matching; MP = Market pricing

when, in the process of the critical incident, particular fragments were witnessed and related this information to the stages of the dynamic PC contract model. Fragments were categorized according to either explicit indications as reported by participants or according to the researchers' interpretation based on the participants' storyline. Figure 3 shows the eventual coding on which our enquiry was built. Three researchers were involved in the process of coding, discussing, and adjusting the codes as we proceeded. Two additional scholars provided a thorough sample check by randomly checking several fragments regarding their consistency and the logic of coding. Captured memos, as well

as the industry knowledge gained, were used to enrich the analytical process.

Results

We followed employees' change stories to understand how the dynamic phase model of psychological contracting is reflected in employees' experiences of organizational change. First, we report how our empirical data map onto the phases of psychological contracting. Second, we add social interaction mechanisms that appear to affect PC evaluations throughout this process. Last, we consider the

sequence in which social exchange seems to evolve over time.

Dynamic phase model of psychological contracting reflected in employees' experiences of organizational change (RQ 1)

Experiences reflecting PC maintenance phase

In the absence of major disruptions, we noted a positively experienced communal atmosphere (often referred to as family culture) characterizing much of the participants' work experience. Respondents talked about this in a taken-for-granted, symbolic referral to "the way things are". It seems that the higher-level industry context of digital disruption directly impacts the lower-level beliefs, since change was perceived as "part of the deal" of working in travel industry. This strategic level change (abstract and originated outside the organization) did not seem to interrupt with routine thinking, nor did it attract attention to the individual PC. Employees' experiences of this phase are illustrated in Table 3.

Disruption, renegotiation, and repair

The announcement of specific changes targeted at the daily (tactical and operational) work environment, such as building new teams, merging and restructuring activities, foreseen lay-offs, was often perceived as a disruptive event (the critical incident). In response to this type of announcement, employees initially developed "what is in it for me" evaluations focused on personal goal attainment.

The data indicate (both positive and negative) affective responses to disruptions in the exchange relation represented by the employee experiences. Employees' experiences of this phase are illustrated in Table 4. On the positive side, disruptions contributing to goal attainment, as outlined by Rousseau et al. (2018), resulted in positive, optimistic change attitudes and PC *renegotiation*. Employees reflected on expected future benefits that were not part of their existing PC. On the other hand, disruptions causing negative affect were found to lead to fearful future expectations, and employees cognitively and behaviourally anticipated on such a situation by lowering their contributive efforts (illustrative for *repair*). Employees took previous change experiences into account and applied intra-individual self-regulatory tactics of "not letting it happen again" [also known as "reciprocation wariness" (Eisenberger, Cotterell, & Marvel, 1987)]. Additionally, corroborating Rousseau et al.'s (2018) explanation of the dynamic phase model, we found examples of *velocity feedback* (i.e., the speed with which the individual receives the desired information on the degree to which his/her goals in the PC will be attained) influencing employees' evaluations.

Restoring maintenance (thriving, reactivation, impairment)

To reach PC restoration and return to the maintenance phase (unfortunately, we do not have data in which "exit or dissolution" is the outcome of PC disruption), the above-mentioned trust and relationship management (including management's responsiveness to the employee's needs) are suggested to be crucial employer efforts. We found that especially the *feeling of being heard* had a positive influence on the restoration of trust

Table 3. Experiences reflecting PC maintenance (163 fragments related to this phase).

Interview Question	Observation	Sample Quotes
Can you tell me what it is like to work here?	Interviewees stress collective atmosphere & balanced relationships (observed 20 times)	<p>"We all share the same passion, I like that I feel we are in it together ... also in times of stress, we really form a solid unit." (Participant 11, age 30, female, Travel Specialist, translated)</p> <p>"Personal matters, opinions, frustrations, we share everything around here. In good times this is a positive thing, but it also strengthens some negative sentiments. We sometimes really know how to collectively turn to negative interpretations. Since opinions get spread, we infect each other so easily." (Participant 10, age 28, male, Team Leader CSC, translated)</p> <p>"People just know. It is a fact that you must change, so it is just like that." (Participant 22, age 41, female, Team Leader, translated)</p> <p>"We are sort of an internet company, and as such, to freeze is to lose. So for me it is only logical that changes keep coming." (Participant 7, age 28, female, Account Management Support, translated)</p>
Would you say, in general, that there is a lot of change going on?	Change is a normal aspect of the business (observed 21 times)	<p>"Yes, it is a good and only logical thing to do [change]; stagnation is deterioration." (Participant 8, age 28, female, Travel Advisor, translated)</p> <p>"We have to change; if we don't, we cannot succeed. It all moves so fast. We are a large organization and it is difficult for us to respond fast. The landscape is changing, so how do we create our right to exist, that's the one thing on our mind." (Participant 18, age 37, female, Subject Matter Expert, translated)</p> <p>"I think some 'fresh air' that comes with change is always good." (Participant 23, age 43, female, Controller, translated)</p> <p>"Logically, a lot has changed in 12 years. Tourism changes, so obviously we must change. It is fast, dynamic, and digital now." (Participant 18, age 37, female, Subject Matter Expert, translated)</p>

Table 4. Experiences reflecting **disruption, renegotiation, repair** (343 fragments related to this phase).

Interview Question	Observation	Sample Quotes
Can you tell me about your experiences when change was announced?	People evaluate PC elements upon early signs of change (observed 18 times)	<p>"See, you must know that when they present their plans, you can estimate what the consequences for me personally will be. I am like, wait a minute, this will result in this and that outcome, and soon I realize for me personally this is beneficial (or not)." (Participant 17, age 36, male, Experience Manager, translated)</p> <p>"I don't like it that resources have been so limited for quite some time now, but this does not change my relationship with my employer, as long as I find something to do that adds to the collective ... I was also there when there were still good times, so that helps." (Participant 18, age 37, female, Subject Matter Expert, translated)</p> <p>"My direct supervisor left the organization just yesterday; you see, people leaving creates opportunities. I drew a new job profile for myself and immediately presented it to the Director. I told her: this is what I do, where I want to grow into." (Participant 20, age 38, male, Webmaster, translated)</p>
PC perceptions interact with change attitudes (observed 5 times) What is in it for me: some people see chances (observed 13 times)	<p>"You know, I like working here, so I know this means I have to go along with change." (Participant 16, age 34, male, Travel Consultant)</p> <p>"There might be chances ahead. Since we merge, there will also be more opportunity to ... how to say, when we are on our own, we are quite vulnerable ... And in future times, I might be able to delegate more work to the team and free up time to work on the things that I like." (Participant 23, age 43, female, Controller, translated)</p>	<p>"I knew this was the right moment to rethink my deal. If I wanted to grow, this change meant an opportunity to become partner. That was what I was heading for." (Participant 21, age 39, male, Product Developer, translated)</p> <p>"For me, I feel excitement. We are going to do something different! Something new is about to happen. So for me it is a good thing." (Participant 12, age 31, female, Innovation Officer, translated)</p>
What is in it for me: some people feel threatened (observed 13 times)	<p>"When they presented those plans, I thought hmm, what does this imply for me, what if they put me, as a minority, in the basement of this organization? I was afraid to become less valued and appreciated." (Participant 25, age 57, male, Manager Tour Operating Projects, translated)</p>	<p>"I didn't see the use of it, was afraid it would slow me down ... I understand that we need to play by the rules, also for the new people, ... but sometimes I just ignore the new system and continue doing it my way." (Participant 16, age 34, male, Travel Consultant)</p>
Velocity of organizational response matters (observed 8 times)	<p>"They announced something about working in new teams, followed by two months of silence. That's far from OK, right? Colleagues start to question what is going to happen to them. I told them [mgt.], listen you cannot just say nothing for two months, come to clear communication on the implications." (Participant 15, age 34, male, Programmer, translated)</p>	<p>"If you ask for a meeting, it takes a month for it to actually take place. A total no go. If something is on your mind, you just want to discuss it and get a response within a week." (Participant 12, age 31, female, Innovation Officer, translated)</p>

– and thus on PC restoration. This also means that managerial failure to respond to this feeling prevents the PC's return to a healthy relationship. In this specific case, the employee concerned did not feel included and settled for a PC at lower levels of fulfilment than before. Employees' experiences of this phase are illustrated in Table 5.

Summarizing, as a start for our exploration, we provided empirical footholds supporting recent theorizing on the dynamics of psychological contracting by showing that employees – based on their experiences over a course of interactions that unfold over time – changed their perceptions regarding inducements that could be expected, and which investments should be made in return. We used Rousseau et al.'s (2018) dynamic phase model as a frame of reference that was mapped upon participants' change stories. Next, we explored how specific social interaction mechanisms might expand the range of navigation anchors that employees build on in interactions within their social context.

Social interaction mechanisms affecting the currently known phases of psychological contracting (RQ2)

Different from the dominant dyadic (employer – employee) view on PC processing, we found strong socially-oriented PC evaluations of daily experiences. People valued and evaluated the social interactions they were involved in throughout the change processes. It seemed very important for individuals to better understand what others invest and receive, in order to make sense of their own experiences and the perceived fairness of the accompanying personal gains and losses. In the following section, we repeat the phases maintenance, disruption, renegotiation/repair, and restored maintenance, yet now focus on indicated forms of social interaction defining individuals' PC re-evaluation. In doing so, we refer to the Unified Theory of Social Relations (Fiske, 1992) and normative-contextual framework (Solinger, 2019) as our frames of reference in the understanding of social exchange. Illustrations of social interaction effects throughout dynamic psychological contracting are included in Tables 6, 7, and 8.

Social interaction throughout maintenance

As outlined above, the experience of a strong social atmosphere characterized the maintenance phase throughout employees' change stories. Additionally, it was noted that the corresponding interactions with their peers seemed to be important drivers for this situational evaluation. Furthermore, employees tried to resolve social dissonance when inconsistencies in their re-evaluation occurred. People copied each other's attitudes towards certain situations and were not (just like that) willing to risk the good atmosphere and inter-collegial relationship. A strong shared consensus was noted on the desired equilibrium state (kindness and sharing) with normative connotations of "this is who we are". Personal goals remained conspicuously absent in participants' reports of the situation and their evaluative processes.

Social interaction throughout disruption, renegotiation, and repair

Notwithstanding the few stories in which disruption triggered PC maintenance into renegotiation, the majority of employees'

Table 5. Experiences reflecting **restoration of maintenance** (thriving/reactivation/impairment/dissolution) (97 fragments related to this phase).

Interview Question	Observation	Sample Quotes
Can you tell me about your experiences as the change process proceeded?	19 interviewees talked about the end of the process/a return to maintenance phases. Interviewees expressed positive PC outcomes after the change (observed 5 times)	Others had not yet reached this phase in their change processes. "If it was not for this change, I would have left the organization. Thanks to this change, I can work on things that I like and that I am good at. It kind of saved me. I feel a renewed energy to aim high and get the best turnover possible." (Participant 19, age 37, female, Purchase Specialist, translated) "I am far less involved now. We used to have smaller teams. Now, when there is change, you get an e-mail from Poland or something. Now it is more like: here is the change, deal with it. It is a shame, it used to be different ... I have learned to be less involved, mentally. At 6 PM it is done." (Participant 16, age 34, male, Travel Consultant, translated)
Interviewees expressed negative PC outcomes after the change (observed 18 times)	Interviewees expressed negative PC outcomes after the change (observed 18 times)	"Apparently, they trust me doing this. Otherwise they would have told me. The guidance was really good, training and everything. Yes, I have great trust in my employer." (Participant 26, age 59, female, Customer Contact Centre, translated) "[CEO] used to manage the important things. [MT member] took care of the rest. I reported to [CEO], but now [name] and [name] coordinate the block. I miss my direct connection to [CEO]. In the end, I find this difficult." (Participant 2, female, age 25, Back-office Administrator, translated) "I feel like only a small player in a really large and political game. I therefore feel less ownership for results than I used to." (Participant 6, age 27, female, PR Officer, translated)
		"At first I was 100% in love [with the organization]. Now I would say it is a business agreement. It seems everything is possible, but it is not. So then I am like OK, no more giving my everything. It has to run both ways." (Participant 21, age 39, male, Product Developer, translated)
		"It appeared to me like 'how nice of you to provide feedback, but we will not take it into account'. And indeed, they didn't. I could be of much more value for the company. But you know, it is the way it is, I will have to accommodate ... " (Participant 24, age 50, female, ICT Employee, translated) "At a certain point I think to myself, 'well, let's leave it now and we will see'. You sort of turn to another mode. First I was proactive, but now I am like, sure, just let me know when you do know what you are going to do." (Participant 18, age 37, female, Subject Matter Expert, translated)

Table 6. Social interactions in **maintenance** (163 fragments related to this phase).

Interview Question	Observation	Sample Quotes
Can you tell me what it is like to work here?	Interviewees talked about social interaction to express positive atmosphere (observed 24 times)	<p>"We are all very social and enthusiastic colleagues ... I have made many friends here in the organization and value the fact that we really stand for it together ..." (Participant 11, age 30, female, Travel Specialist, translated)</p> <p>"Looking back at those 12 years, most important relations are with my team, we are super close. We help each other out. We also meet outside of work, go on weekends, etc." (Participant 18, age 37, female, Subject Matter Expert, translated)</p> <p>"We are like family ... You know, if one person makes a lot of noise, you will always see the others align with his/her ideas. Even if it is a bad idea. If everyone is happy, I will not be the one to say no." (Participant 15, age 34, male, Programmer, translated)</p>
	Colleagues were like family (observed 7 times)	<p>"The collegial atmosphere, people amongst each other, those ties are really strong, I think that is a strength of the organization ... You can go to everyone and communicate openly." (Participant 17, age 36, male, Experience Manager, translated)</p> <p>"In our department it is swell. We form a close unit." (Participant 13, age 31, female, Customer Service Employee, translated)</p> <p>"The atmosphere is really good. We call it the living-room atmosphere. We are like family. This year, we went to the sea-side, with the whole gang. You know, doing things together, that is what typifies us." (Participant 20, age 38, male, Webmaster, translated)</p>
		<p>"It is a sociable environment, there is a lot of collegial consultation. You can always ask for help, I like that a lot". (Participant 8, age 28, female, Travel Advisor, translated)</p> <p>"I like working here mostly because of my direct colleagues. You know, with all the changes, they are the ones giving me positive energy." (Participant 16, age 34, male, Travel Consultant, translated)</p> <p>"It is nice to be happy to go to work. It is a bit of a family atmosphere around here." (Participant 5, age 27, female, Scrum Master, translated)</p>

recalled experiences emphasized PC repair. Especially throughout repair, the exchange process focused on the local internal environment (team level), and *colleagues* seemed to be the most frequently considered interaction partners. Interactions referred to equity in the investment in change. Employees' attention was directed to the (lack of) actions from co-workers, while they formed personal opinions upon each other's capacity to adapt. In maintenance, employees often reported to value their positive egalitarian connection to colleagues (calling them friends); in repair, this social atmosphere was under pressure as polarization evolved. Respondents developed negative prejudice that overruled the previously reported strong social bonding. Relationship management as an *employer* effort did not seem to be a priority in employees' experienced needs. Instead, our data indicated that the lack of *collegial* cooperation and *collegial* trust seemed to drive employees' responses in repair.

Social interaction throughout restoring maintenance

When we examined the attempts to restore the PC, we noted a surprising prevalence of social comparison, information sharing, and (social) alliance formation mechanisms. Here, the social calibration of outcomes led to new alliances between people who felt that they came out of disruption as "winners", resulting from successful renegotiation and thriving psychological contracts, alliances between those who came out with a restored positive exchange relation, and alliances of "victims", who experienced impairment of the PC. When transitioning back to maintenance, employees involved in repair as well as in renegotiation shared their evaluations and formed local allies. The development of new social ties while transitioning from renegotiation/repair back to maintenance is illustrated in Table 8.

Summarizing, throughout this section, we provided empirical indications that social interactions interfered with the individual's dynamic PC re-evaluation process. Change recipients were clearly seeking external validation in their attempts to renew their PCs. Thus, the results not only support the theory of the dynamic model of psychological contracting, but they also suggest that, throughout psychological contracting, PC re-evaluation involves an interesting mix of individual and social processes, characterized by individual-level considerations and direct consensus between colleagues as well as shared mental models.

Social interaction mechanisms evolving over time throughout dynamic PC processes in organizational change (RQ 3)

After mapping the social interaction elements onto the dynamic model of psychological contracting, suggesting that social exchange elements should be considered more prominently in empirical work, this section places the issue of social interaction at centre stage. To this end, we elaborated on the interaction patterns throughout time as reported by employees' change stories. A process view is presented in Figures 4 and 5 to illustrate the dominant forms of interaction, following from Fiske (1992), and the insights from Fiske (1992) and Solinger (2019) were combined to illustrate the

Table 7. Social interaction throughout **disruption, renegotiation, and repair** (343 fragments related to this phase).

Interview Question	Observation	Sample Quotes
Can you tell me about your experiences when change was announced?	<p>Institutionalized group norms deteriorate/polarization (observed 19 times)</p> <p>People start comparing own investments to those of colleagues (observed 11 times)</p> <p>Influenced by how others are treated (observed 9 times)</p>	<p>"You know, my colleagues are just short-sighted. Everyone immediately dislikes it [the change]. It is not the infrastructure; the whining people got a new PC and then all of a sudden, they thought everything was great. So short-sighted. I cannot even blame them, they are just like that when something changes." (Participant 20, age 38, male, Webmaster, translated)</p> <p>"In the end, I think I sort of made sure my own position was secured, so to say (laughs). At that moment I am less concerned with others' feeling and whether they are comfortable with the situation." (Participant 21, age 39, male, Product Developer, translated)</p> <p>"I have always been successful by cooperating. So that is what I go for, but if the other party responds in a hesitant or reserved manner, I am like OK, don't bother, then it is everyone for him/herself now ... It is quite competitive ... The lack of reciprocity is contagious." (Participant 6, age 27, female, PR Officer, translated)</p> <p>"It is really disturbing; the others are just doing gymnastics at the office. I think to myself: how do we divide the work around here. It is just not fair. The one team is drowning in loads of work, while the others are just goofing around. No, that's just not ... " (Participant 7, age 28, female, Account Management Support, translated)</p> <p>"[sniffs] "This hurts me a lot. Someone left, and this matter was not correct. I thought, well if this is the way we deal with people around here, then I do not want to work here. He was one of my best work friends, and from one day to another, he was transferred to the central department ... I was not involved, but this whole matter really harmed my trust." (Participant 23, age 43, female, Controller, translated)</p> <p>"Those people are just too operationally focused. If you do not agree on the rules of the game beforehand, people just mess around, it will never work ... It frustrates me ... The people in charge did not really go for it." (Participant 18, age 37, female, Subject Matter Expert, translated)</p> <p>"Change tears families apart, that's drama. It results in so much tension. 'Oh no, he is going there and she is going there', you know." (Participant 12, age 31, female, Innovation Officer, translated)</p> <p>"I was so busy comparing myself to what my colleague did. I always felt he was given priority/better treatment by our manager. He got more opportunities. so to say ... And since I was so caught up by this comparison, I thought I had to deliver the same results." (Participant 14, age 32, female, Yield Manager, translated)</p> <p>"For me, the most painful was that some old supervisors left. They were dismissed. They had always given their best. [slows down] And the team never gave them true recognition and appreciation. They felt undervalued. This whole thing had a big impact on me personally." (Participant 11, age 30, female, Travel Specialist, translated)</p> <p>"We think, there we go again, yet another department outsourced. People who have worked here for years have to leave. That is really disturbing. It triggers a negative attitude for me." Participant 16, age 34, male, Travel Consultant, translated)</p>

Table 8. Social interaction throughout **restoring maintenance** (thriving/reactivation/impairment/dissolution) (97 fragments related to this phase).

Interview Question	Observation	Sample Quotes
Can you tell me about your experiences as the change process proceeded?	19 interviewees talked about the end of the process/a return to maintenance phases. New social structures to be built, leading to new team PCs (observed 15 times)	<p>"OK, so first we were a group of people accidentally together. And now, during the past few weeks, we have started to become a team. Well, the five of us. There are still those two who only work for themselves and not for the team goals and vision that we have shared." (Participant 7, age 28, female, Account Management Support, translated)</p> <p>"I was a [name subgroup] employee, but since I started as the Chair of the 'residents' committee for the new building, you see we are a team of people from all subunits organizing social events, I have started to become, and feel, a [corporate group] employee." (Participant 20, age 38, male, Webmaster, translated)</p> <p>"We went to Disney with the whole team, there we concluded that we indeed are one team now. We got rid of 'you are Sales' or 'you are Purchase'. That phase of separation is definitely behind us. It is just a matter of finetuning now." (Participant 19, age 37, female, Purchase Specialist, translated)</p> <p>"The old gang still refers to the good old days and tells us they always worked until late at night. But I think to myself, well, when I really need you, you are never there." (Participant 23, age 43, female, Controller, translated)</p>
		<p>"It is always nice to have a buddy to share the experience with, so that is what I also do now. I have found someone to exchange thoughts. You walk the road together, preferably with someone likeminded." (Participant 18, age 37, female, Subject Matter Expert, translated)</p> <p>"We now have team days, and you know, I have to travel for 2.5 hours to get there. But if we are there, all together, that's what it is all about. That makes why I still enjoy work." (Participant 16, age 34, male, Travel Consultant, translated)</p> <p>"Sales and Purchase, we go quite well together. It is the admin team that still causes trouble. The first two teams work fluently: it is in the last 'link' in our chain where people are frustrated. They are like 'not my responsibility, you deal with it.'" (Participant 19, age 37, female, Purchase Specialist, translated)</p>
	Social group is still (re) building after change has ended (observed 3 times)	<p>"The old gang just has a different commitment, more emotional involvement. And if we are asked to work overtime it is no problem. Whereas you see with the new people, they care less for the organization." (Participant 21, age 39, male, Product Developer, translated)</p>

pattern of social exchange over time. As will be elaborated upon below, the interaction pattern evolved from collective orientation ("*it is ...* ") in stable contracts to individual orientation ("*I think ...* ") following disruption and to relational orientation ("*we think ...* ") during renegotiation/repair and restoration of maintenance.

Collective orientation

In a state of equilibrium, employees logically relied on institutionalized interaction patterns of "*the way things always are*". Employees were most certainly aware of the changing industry; however, as long as it did not directly impact their own local concerns, they held shared beliefs concerning the future implications of change on their often normative PC expectations. Institutionalized contract norms entailed stability in the social environment and assured group norm fulfillment ("*it is ...*"). Communal Sharing provided the dominant form of interactions at this time.

Individual orientation

Following a sense of early disruptive warning signs, employees seemed to (almost immediately) turn towards personal exchange (see Figure 4), trying to calibrate implications of the organizational change primarily for themselves. As disruptive information reached the individual, it appeared that personal goals, preferences, and interests were evaluated before tuning in with colleagues for confirmation or aligning interpretations. "*What does this change ahead of us imply for me?*" characterized the dominantly present Market Pricing interactions at this time ("*I think ...* " – self focused).

Individual and relational orientation

After moments of disruption, when consequences became clear, relational Equality Matching interactions (i.e., vigilance about equity in social exchange) took up a prominent place in the socially-oriented re-evaluation. Since this was combined with a continued strong individualization of norms, we sensed an "*every-one against everyone*" situation in the interviews. The perceived lack of contributions by colleagues to the greater (organizational) cause easily disturbed peer relations, thus disrupting cohesive ties. At this point, in an attempt to make use of somewhat more objective information in an insecure situation, scorecards and ratios of inducements and investments mattered a great deal. Interestingly, although it seemed that everyone had just previously been involved in assessing the disruption in terms of individual goal alignment, it appeared that the lack of community-focused orientations now nursed the development of negative collegial perceptions of each other, hence transforming the interactions from being individual to becoming relationally oriented.

When transitioning back to maintenance, people appeared to build up new team-based relational norms and to form social bonds, with new, albeit fragile, shared perceptions ("*getting back together*"). At the end of the experienced processes, there was an increase in Authority Ranking (relational) interactions, and employees formulated their expectations from their leaders in the new situation. Perceptions shared within the team strengthened the individual's bargaining power. However, logically, perceptions had not reached the level of institutionalization known from equilibrium state (that is, there were shared individual

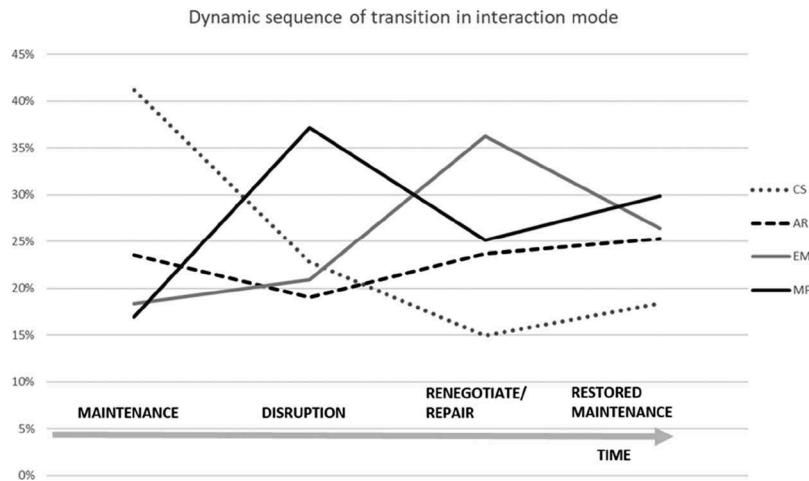


Figure 4. Dynamic sequence in preferred interaction mode throughout psychological contracting.

Note: MP = Market Pricing; EM = Equality Matching; AR = Authority Ranking; CS = Communal Sharing, See Fiske (1992)

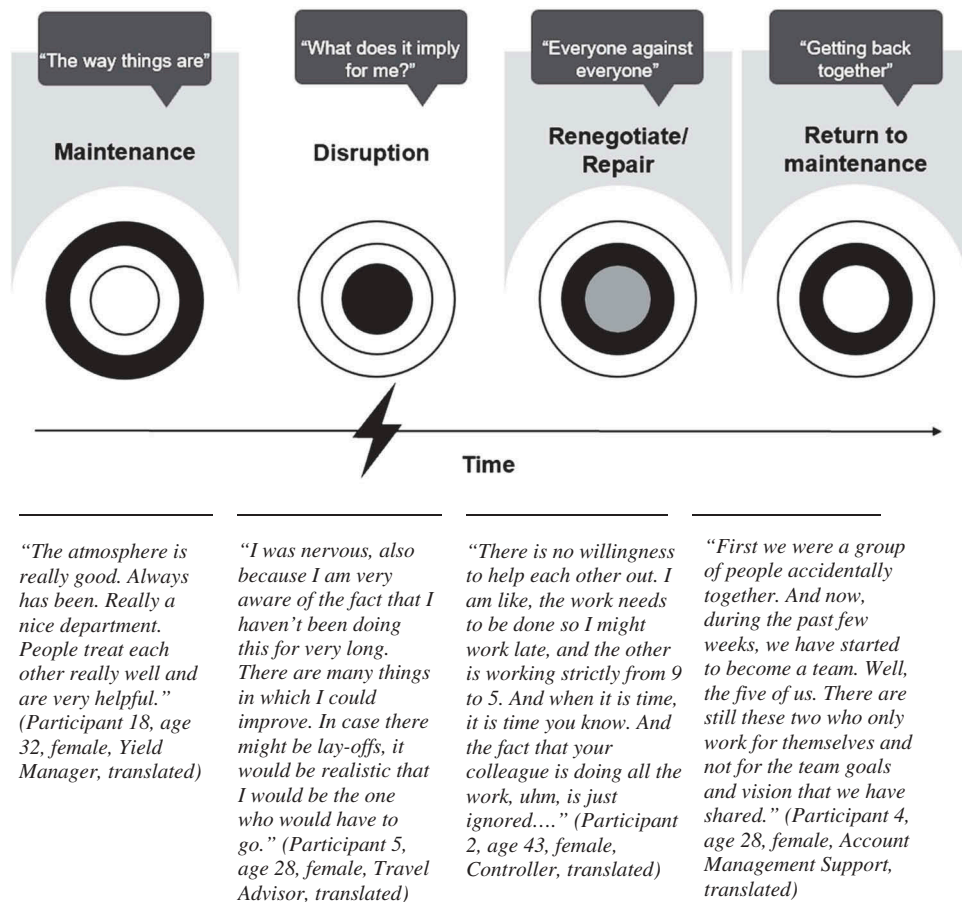


Figure 5. Summary of findings on the sequence of interaction orientation throughout dynamic psychological contracting: from collective (outer circle) to individual (inner circle) and relational (middle circle).

contracts, but no shared team contracts). Interactions were characterized by Market Pricing and Equality Matching frames of reference, referring to a strong individual awareness in the exchange. With this in mind, people started to develop new relationships in which trust was (re)built at local team level ("we think ...").

Discussion

In this paper, by means of an interactional approach, we sought to investigate the socially embedded nature of change in the PC following an episode of organizational change. Our results confirm the notion that the temporal features of

psychological contracting – PC maintenance, disruption, repair/renegotiation, and returning back to maintenance or ending in dissolution (Rousseau et al., 2018) – do indeed map quite well on change recipients' recalled experiences of organizational change. What is new is that our data confirm the idea that individuals, via interactions with their peers. As individuals come to a consensus and individual psychological become shared and normative, these psychological contracts are no longer of a strictly individual nature (Ho, 2005; Laulié & Tekleab, 2016; Solinger, 2019). We noticed that employees adjust reciprocal expectations to their social environments and use social referents and subjective information differently in consecutive phases of psychological contracting. That is, our data further showed a temporally consistent pattern of social interactions, starting from Collective Orientation (*"it is ..."*) for PC maintenance, followed by a transition to individual orientation (*"I think ..."*) in reaction to PC disruption, and then Relational Orientation (*"we think ..."*) during renegotiation/repair and transitions back into the maintenance of the PC. Complementary to these findings, we found a consistent pattern of social interactions when examining Fiske's (1992) forms of social referencing. That is, for PC maintenance, Communal Sharing was found to be the dominant form of interaction, but this sharply declined following an organizational change, giving way to Market Pricing after disruption and Equality Matching during renegotiation/repair. These findings both confirm and provoke the present state of theorizing, which will be discussed in further detail below.

Dynamic phase model of psychological contracting reflected in employees' experiences of organizational change

With their dynamic phase model of PC processes, Rousseau et al. (2018) meaningfully expanded the scholarly knowledge of the PC as a dynamic construct. Two additional insights that corroborate this earlier work are drawn from our current contribution. As changes in the PC are closely related to organizational change (Tomprou & Hansen, 2018), we consider several understandings from the organizational change literature to interpret employees' responses to changing situations. First, the temporal features of PC as forwarded by Rousseau et al. (2018) show similarities with a well-established sequence of unfreezing, movement, and refreezing in organizational change (Fugate, Kinicki, & Scheck, 2002; Isabella, 1990; Kanter, Stein, & Jick, 1992; Lewin, 1947). This particular sequence of organizational change phases rests on the assumption of *episodic* change, where change is viewed as an occasional interruption or divergence from an equilibrium (Weick & Quinn, 1999). The fact that we found support for this mode of experiencing organizational change rather than, for instance, a model of constant, continuous change (Weick & Quinn, 1999) is theoretically interesting. It confirms the idea that while the psychological contracting phenomenon is inherently dynamic by nature, it is also an inertial, equilibrium-seeking phenomenon.

Second, our data partially support the self-regulatory mechanisms as stressed by Rousseau et al. (2018) throughout specific phases of psychological contracting. In particular, we found that individuals' personal goals and the recognition of

opportunities for goal attainment in the change process are important drivers of change in the PC. For instance, goal attainment mechanisms explained the emergence of those groups of employees whose PC thrived following an organizational change; by being able to seize opportunities for goal attainment that were not there before, those employees ended up with a restored PC. Others ended up with a deteriorated PC (fewer opportunities for goal attainment than before). Furthermore, our data confirm the importance of speedy feedback from the organization. Rousseau et al. (2018), for instance, discuss that it is the employers' timely and adequate response to employees' "hot feelings and sense of loss" (p. 12) that triggers the transition in PC restoration to previous levels rather than a transition to PC deterioration.

Apart from the above-mentioned validating observations, we will highlight below how our findings can possibly expose a number of potential blind spots in the present literature by discussing theoretical implications related to our second and third research questions. Below, we shall elaborate on the contribution of this study in greater detail by explaining how the dynamic phase model could potentially be extended by the inclusion of social influences.

Social interaction mechanisms and the evolving sequence of collective, individual, and relational interactions over time

By building on insights from institutional theory (Cardinale, 2018) and the use of an interactional approach (Coyle-Shapiro & Neuman, 2004), this study exposes the social nature of psychological contracting, thus adding to the recent focus on social context within PC literature (Akkermans et al., 2019; Gibbard et al., 2017; Laulié & Tekleab, 2016) and on PC in organizational change (Tomprou & Hansen, 2018). Below we discuss the implications of these our findings in light of these previous studies and social exchange theory (SET: Blau, 1964).

"It is so good that you always have the feeling of doing it together, we are all in it together. Also in busy times, it is really hard work, but it is truly a collective unity doing the work (Participant 11, age 30, female, Travel Specialist, translated)"

To begin, although we await future studies to confirm the robustness of our findings in other settings, our empirical work suggests that the PC maintenance phase is markedly *social* in nature (cf. Tomprou & Hansen, 2018), which is consistent with SET's original emphasis on group solidarity, consensus and social norms (Blau, 1964). To illustrate: for PC maintenance, Communal Sharing was found to be the dominant form of interaction mentioned in the interviews in our study.

"Evaluating the human factor, I think everyone wants the best for us. And on issues like providing continuity, salary pay, the way things are taken care of, you know, it is just handled very well around here. On the other hand, we all know that the workload is heavy, they challenge us a lot in that sense (Participant 17, age 36, male, Experience Manager, translated)"

Further, in the dynamic phase model (Rousseau et al., 2018), it is argued that mild, low arousal positive affect is associated with PC maintenance; this, in turn, is sustained by goal-consistent

inducement from the organization (Rousseau et al., 2018). While these assumptions hold true when strictly related to personal exchange, we found goal-consistent inducements (and the related I-focused orientation) to be conspicuously *absent* in PC maintenance, while employees strongly emphasized a collective orientation (Communal Sharing) as the main type of interaction. Apparently, stable perceptions of inducements and obligations seem to occur, yet *not* in a “closed” dyadic system of strictly personal exchanges with an organization. Rather, employees experience them as shared within the broader social space of the organization. In the terminology of Blau’s original SET, this means that the balance of social exchange has become an institutionalized “social arrangement”.

This corroborates Solinger’s (2019) normative-contextual view, where the “standard” against which a PC is weighted is not necessarily personal in nature (e.g., a goal attainment motive). Consistent with institutional theory, the automaticity that is characteristic of PC maintenance does not only result from goal-relevant inducements, but also from a continuous re-enactment (and the policing) of social patterns (cf. Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012). In that sense, the role of social context (i.e., the individual nesting in teams and organizations) is not just a factor in the prediction of the PC, but a shaper of the very meaning of the contract (cf. Johns, 2006). This also corroborates the understanding PC as a shared mental model (Akkermans et al., 2019).

“My colleagues who have been working here for a long time, they have been through a lot. They can be quite cynical. And what I see is that when they work extra for example, they immediately want some sort of reward. Whereas I would say it is just part of the job. (Participant 10, age 28, male, Team Leader CSC, translated)”

Interestingly, PC disruption was marked by a shift from a collective to a self-focused orientation and a concomitant peak in Market Pricing referents. Since violation occurred after a period of strong and collectively experienced stability, employees plausibly experienced “collective violation” and, as a result, simultaneously felt to be “less able to offer support and advice to colleagues” (Tomprou et al., 2015, p. 574). In fact, Fiske (1992) notes that after the social fabric is disturbed, Market Pricing is left as the only reliable form of interaction.

This is fully consistent with the perspective of SET, which would predict that violations of trust reduce the time horizons of interaction partners and exposes potential conflicts of interest, which implies more self-focused exchanges and the expectation of more immediate returns (Balliet & Van Lange, 2013; Blau, 1964). Further, more recent advances on SET find that events that remind individuals of resource scarcity, spur more competitive, self-focused, and thus Market Pricing types of interactions (Roux, Goldsmith, & Bonezzi, 2015). The advent of I-focused interactions is consistent with our finding that the PC disruption stage was followed by a period of *relational* discord (Equality Matching) in the repair stage, which is consistent with SET’s emphasis on the role of competition for status and social recognition through gossip (Blau, 1964; Wu, Balliet, & Van Lange, 2016a). Our findings revealed that social discord was major processes during PC renegotiation/repair, which implies that that, at least in the context of organizational change, the

restoration of one’s personal PC is inextricably tied to that of others. Blau (1964) argued on this point that in the absence of clarity about everyone’s position and status, contrasting dynamic forces arise in the group. According to SET, this process is accompanied by individuals competing for social recognition and establishing new (informal) leadership; gossip is an important retaliatory mechanism in this regard, which may in a later phase, even promote social integration (Wu, Balliet, & Van Lange, 2016b).

“At this point I confronted her [colleague]. I told her she needed to quit her act on repeatedly sharing all that is negative about my role here ... upon our confrontation she was all like ‘oh oh sorry, I didn’t mean it’. So I learned it is also about power and having the guts to say things out loud.” (Participant 7, age 28, female, Account Management Support, translated)”

Ultimately, relational discord transitioned into constructive modes of resonance and alignment with others, which from a SET perspective can be seen as an increase of forms of indirect reciprocity and social integration (Blau, 1964) while returning back to PC maintenance.

Finally, this study adds to the PC literature by studying contexts that reflect contemporary challenges such as digitalization and technological disruption, both of which are considered truly game-changing developments for entire industries, and by providing insights into the way in which employees factually cope with such environments. Interestingly, while the “bricks-to-clicks” revolution has become a clear societal trend in travel industries across the globe, individual change recipients have paid conspicuously *little* attention to it and have shown remarkably little overt concern about this societal trend as such. It seems as if such trends are generally experienced in a neutrally positive way. However, change recipients have shown concern about more “local” affairs, such as their shattered communal orientations, personal goals, and fairness in the distribution of new PCs as a result of the digital disruption. This, in itself, shows that PCs are often experienced very locally and that the “changing world of work” and disruptive innovations impact on individuals only indirectly, namely when such developments lead to new teams, new hierarchical structures, or foreseen lay-offs; such incidents *did* trigger people to enter the state of “contract awareness”, something which may perhaps be equivalent to a more general “*not in my back yard*” type of effect. It supports the intuition that “for the individual, organizational life is experienced locally” (Ashforth & Rogers, 2012, p. 25). Along these lines, we support the notion that carefully managing “small local changes [is] an important aspect of implementing more complex higher-level changes” (Stouten, Rousseau, & De Cremer, 2018, p. 771).

Limitations and future research

Since our study concerns qualitative research, the generalizability of its results is limited. Moreover, the accuracy of the interactional processes identified would have been improved by studying cognitive responses in real time. Although the use of CIT is considered to be the method of choice for reconstructing past events and qualitatively studying processes (Langley, 1999), responses might still suffer from recollection bias. Furthermore, the process of coding responses could be enhanced by involving participants

by means of focus groups. Although the researchers involved carefully validated all the transcripts with the participants and used all textual and non-textual cues to complete the coding, the outcome of this process remains based on interpretation, and thus subjective in nature. Next to this, our data did not include the creation phase of the dynamic model of psychological contracting (see Alcover, Rico, Turnley, and Bolino (2017) on social influence in the creation phase), and our sample did not include participants who left the changing organization (dissolution as PC outcome). This is a limitation in our data collection and we recommend that future research will include employees that have left the organization. Finally, we know that dispositional employee characteristics and circumstances (such as dispositional resistance and self-efficacy, but also tenure, career stage, and perceived successfulness of past change) influence psychological contracting (Bal, De Lange, Jansen, & Van der Velde, 2008; Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010; Coyle-Shapiro & Neuman, 2004; Robinson, Kraatz, & Rousseau, 1994). We did not account for individual factors influencing idiosyncratic evaluations, and therefore further investigation of these factors is important to understand why some people go through the PC transitions more easily than others.

Based on the outline given above, a number of future research directions can be proposed. More in-depth empirical evidence could be gathered that distinguishes the difference between individual versus normative influences on social exchange, especially in the process of socialization. Also, a better understanding could be developed of why employees seem to be more involved in social comparison throughout repair, compared to renegotiation. The same holds for the unanswered question why strong social ties seem to deteriorate so easily upon disruption, since strong ties might aid coping responses and uncertainty reduction throughout the entire process. In addition, more research is needed to explore the value of small social networks (e.g., cliques) in comparison with larger groups that range from loose to tight coupling, to enrich our understanding the multiple ways in which peers influence one another within the context of “tribes”. To strengthen understanding from a change point of view, and more specifically, concerning the process of change and its relation to psychological contracting, further research could explore potential differential effects of different levels of leadership involved (e.g., CEO, middle management, line manager), as well as potential differences caused by different types of organizational change (both strategic-level and local-level changes). Last, to extend its generalizability, we welcome studies that would gauge the robustness of our findings in other change settings (e.g., other grounds for change, other industrial contexts, and other countries).

Practical implications

Our study demonstrates that in order to align change implementation with the concerns of employees (impacting their motivation to change), individual, team, and the collective level PCs need to be managed throughout the change process in time. The degree to which mental schemas forming the PC are idiosyncratic or shared seems to depend on the unfolding of the change process. An idiosyncratic focus, which seems the most important immediately after PC disruption, highlights

the importance of individual-level approaches and coaching to assist new PC deal making. However, possibly a few days later, employees start sharing and comparing their deals, transforming the matter into a higher-level construct and implying a focus on team expectations which might yield most positive employee returns, for instance in terms of team motivation (Hu & Liden, 2015). This strengthens the idea that mere individual-level change management tactics will not suffice, and tactics that touch upon the group level (e.g., training, focus groups, group-level interventions such as World Café’s), might be more effective at this point. As we already know, it is important to carefully manage the PC during change (Tomprou & Hansen, 2018), and the explored pattern of results from this empirical contribution additionally calls for *timely* and *differentiated* responsiveness in managing employment relationships at different levels. Social awareness and sensitivity to understand not only group processes in managing the PC but also the organizational climate are suggested to be important additions to a manager’s basic toolbox in order to succeed in ever-changing organizational settings.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated the temporal nature of psychological contracting through stages of PC maintenance, disruption, repair/renegotiation, and a return back to maintenance. Additionally, our data have provided insights into the socially embedded nature of PC re-evaluation and have shown a pattern of interactions across the different phases of dynamic psychological contracting consistent with Fiske’s (1992) basic forms of interaction in social life. More specifically, our data suggest that PC *maintenance* is strongly social in nature and that employees experience shared PC notions within the broader social network. Transition from this collective orientation to a self-focused orientation was triggered by PC *disruption*, to be subsequently followed by a period of relational discord in the *renegotiation and repair* stage. Finally, a return to constructive resonance and alignment with others was noted while returning back to PC *maintenance*. Summarizing, we conclude that social interactions seem to play a more prominent role in employees’ re-evaluation processes than was previously theorized in most PC literature. Last, this study shows that social interaction, forming and shaping work relationships, is an important mechanism to understand how employees deal with contemporary large-scale organizational challenges on a day-to-day micro level.

Disclosure statement

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